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ABSTRACT

For the nation as a whole, there is a moving bandwagon of educational change, clearly hitched to attempts to personalize and individualize instruction. The new emphases on the quality of learning appears to offer some potential solutions to two current problems: the twin problems of quality and equality in education. Traditional group-oriented education has emphasized equality in the amount of time spent at the learning task and inequality in the amount learned; individual differences are recognized in grading. Individualized learning, and especially mastery learning, reverses the emphasis, stressing equality in the amount learned and inequality in the time spent; everyone must learn to the same level of achievement. If certain scholars are correct in their assertion that anyone can learn the basic curriculum if given enough time and appropriate help, we have a breakthrough that permits us to conceptualize education in new ways, moving beyond access for all toward learning for each. (Author/MSE)

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Commitments to Improve The Quality of Learning

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COMMITMENTS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

K. Patricia Cross

When I received the announcement of the theme for this annual meeting, I wondered whether "Toward A New Commitment to Education" should be read as a request, a challenge, or a question. The question is not whether new commitment is desirable, but whether it is possible in these times of retrenchment, belt-tightening, and sagging morale. Some careful observers of the educational scene are predicting that nothing much is going to happen in higher education from now until the end of the century. Calling for new commitments and renewed dedication is, of course, an expected function of professional meetings, and there is probably no harm in inspiring educators to the importance of their jobs once a year or so. But a realistic assessment of our times, say the analysts, should not lead us to actually expect new commitments.

The foremost spokesman for the unexciting future of higher education in the years immediately ahead is Clark Kerr. In a recent speech to the Western Regional Meeting of the College Board, Dr. Kerr (1976) observed that higher education has reached an "undulating plateau", and he predicted that "The period ahead of us is not going to provide many opportunities for reform....We will not face another decade that creates possibilities

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for reform and change until about the decade of 2000 to 2010." At that time three things will happen to give higher education a burst of new energy and enthusiasm: 1) The grandchildren of World War II veterans will reach college age, and enrollments will surge ahead once again. 2) Half of the faculty, most hired during the boom period of the 1960's, will reach retirement age, and their replacements will presumably bring new energy and new ideas to higher education. 3) Most of the buildings built during the years of expansion for higher education will be wearing out, and their remodeling or replacement will offer new opportunities for reform.

Unfortunately for me and the majority of my colleagues in higher education, if Dr. Kerr is correct, we will live out our years to retirement relieved of the necessity to change our ways, although, I suspect, a bit bored by the lack of challenge in our profession. It is not exactly the kind of future that encourages new commitments to education.

I hope Dr. Kerr's prediction about the plateau of the next couple of decades is wrong, but history is on his side. The two great reform periods for higher education have been periods of great growth. The first occurred in the middle of the last century when the land-grant colleges were created, and the second came during the middle decades of this century with the call for universal access and the growth of community colleges. Historically, higher education has always reformed itself through adding new institutions and new personnel, not through changing existing structures and people. The message seems to be that it is not new commitments that bring about reform; it is new people. While historical precedent suggests that we should forget about making

new commitments for the next couple of decades, let us look at some counter-arguments which would predict somewhat more challenging years ahead.

The first and most compelling reason for calling for new commitments now is that there is an urgent need to solidify recent reforms directed toward the achievement of equal opportunity. As dramatic and important as the reforms of the 1950's and 60's were, they touched only the fringes of education; they did not permeate the heart of the educational enterprise, which is teaching and learning. Administrative offices at all levels, from the federal Congress to state systems to local admissions and counseling offices, have made major changes in the last two decades. For the nation as a whole, financial aid, recruitment, admissions, and counseling are very different operations, in philosophy as well as practice, from what they were 20 years ago at the height of selective admissions. The college classroom, however, has remained virtually untouched by the most important social reform movement of our times. Faculty members gripe a bit more about the poor quality of the students they are getting, but they continue to teach as though nothing had happened. But the popular press, legislators, parents , and students know that something did happen. They know that the promises made about higher learning and better jobs and happier lives may not be forthcoming for thousands of students who gained equal access to college but not equal opportunities for learning.

Throughout the professional careers of most of us, American higher education has concentrated on achieving education for <u>all</u>. The challenge of the next quarter century will be to achieve education for <u>each</u>.You

heard Sam Proctor speak to the issue of "Equal Opportunity: An Unfinished Agenda." Indeed it is, and it will remain unfinished until equal opportunity for access is accompanied by equal opportunity for learning.

The second argument in favor of making new commitments in 1976, rather than waiting until a more propitious and expansive period of growth in the year 2000, is that I think we may be nurturing a false hope that growth will bring about reform. If one is going to point to growth and reform as inevitable partners in change, then one really has to ask whether growth stimulates reform -- as Dr. Kerr assumes -- or whether reform stimulates growth. I think the case can be made that historically reform has been responsible for growth in higher education rather than the other way around. The reason for the dramatic growth in higher education in the mid-1800's and mid-1900's was that a national commitment was made to serve broader segments of the population -- the children of farmers and factory workers in the case of the land-grant movement, and urban and blue-collar youth and adults in the case of the community colleges. It was new kinds of students that swelled college enrollments, not simply population growth. Indeed, Carnegie Commission estimates (1971,p. 127) show that in 1880 at the height of the land-grant college expansion, 70 percent of the increase in college enrollments could be attributed to new kinds of students, whereas only 30 percent was attributed to an increase in the number of 18 to 21 year olds in the population. The figures are even more dramatic for the decades from 1940 to 1960, when three-fourths of the increase in college enrollments was attributed to increased rates of college attendance rather than to population increases.

The colleges that are growing now are those that have made a commitment to serve a new kind of college student -- the adult part-time learner. Thus, it seems to me that the dramatic periods of growth and reform in higher education occur not primarily as a result of population changes, but rather as a result of society's commitment to expand educational opportunity.

If, however, we are going to wait for new kinds of students to swell the growth and the enthusiasm for change, then I suggest that we may have a long wait. Higher education is fresh out of new populations to serve. It is hard to think of any segment of the population that has not been considered in the trend toward the democratization of higher education. It is hardly prophetic to suggest that by the year 2000, colleges will be serving ethnic minorities, poor people, women, senior citizens, part-time learners, prisoners, low achievers, and anyone else who wants to go to college. We have simply run out of groups to include in the egalitarian thrust that has been the major force for change throughout the history of higher education in this country. Not only are we running out of the new populations that provide growth, but it looks as though we shall do so without solving some of the problems that we thought we were addressing. Although universal education has certainly raised the floor of learning in this country, it is difficult to demonstrate that we are making substantial progress in bringing about equality through education. Indeed, there is some evidence that the disparity between the "haves" and "have nots" has not grown appreciably less with the achievement of near-universal secondary education and the rapid approach of universal access to college.

Thus, I conclude that the problems of education can no longer be addressed through reforms associated with growth. They will have to be approached through changes in the kind of education offered. We will have to dedicate ourselves anew to improvement in the quality of learning. In considering this issue, it is important to realistically assess our chances of changing existing people and institutions rather than depending on growth to add new people and new ideas.

Despite all of the rhetoric on college campuses these days about improving the teaching performance of present faculty members, most analysts of change are not very sanguine about teaching old dogs new tricks. A new international journal, that I happened to read just as I was convincing myself that people could and would change their ways, contained two statements that sobered my optimism. One chemistry professor with a great deal of experience in trying to introduce his colleagues at the University of Leeds in England to try some new teaching strategies wrote matter-of-factly, "The reluctance of most academics to learn new educational methods is very well known. One needs only to look at the attendance at seminars and courses on teaching techniques in one's own university to recognize this, and the difficulty many of us have in putting ourselves in the role of learner, particularly in public, cannot be overstated (Ayscough, 1976, p. 6)." In the same issue, Martin Trow (1976) undertook to explain why experimentation and reform in undergraduate education are so often greeted with "suspicion and even hostility" on the part of academic departments. He concluded that because departments claim a monopoly of expertise in their disciplines, research by outsiders on the form and content of instruction is seen as a challenge to departmental expertise. Thus, he says, "innovations in the organization and

forms of instruction are linked to successful attacks on academic authority (p. 20)." Trow's conclusion, of course, is even gloomier than Clark Kerr's. Kerr, at least, suggests that when we get new faculty members, reform is possible. In Trow's analysis, we will have to wait for new academic structures.

Historically, most academic reform has been linked to new structures -- new land-grant colleges, new community colleges, new institutions for non-traditional education. Quite pointedly, most of the newest structures are de-emphasizing the power of academic departments which are increasingly seen as faculty-centered rather than student-centered. But today, as the avenues for creating alternative structures are shut down because of the slowing growth rate of higher education, external pressures on departments and faculties can only increase in intensity. Indeed, rising pressures are obvious today as legislatures mandate faculty working hours, regents demand attention to undergraduate instruction, and administrators press for required evaluations of teaching effectiveness.

One possible reaction to the intrusive demands of the public for change in academe is for academicians to take the leadership in research and application of improved instructional approaches. And this is happening. There is today a movement for instructional reform in all kinds of institutions. Faculty development programs abound, and the directors of the more than 1000 new offices that have been created in just the last couple of years are betting their careers that the quality of learning can be improved through working with present faculty members

and existing institutions. To date there is encouraging evidence that they will win their bet.

The greatest change in teaching and learning is occurring in the community colleges where, for example, programs of individualized instruction doubled between 1971 and 1974 (Cross, 1976). Community college faculty are ready to change because, for one thing, they are painfully reminded every day that the old teaching methods are not reaching their new students. Change is coming in four-year institutions, too, but at a somewhat slower pace. Many university instructors are still protected from the full impact of the recent access revolution. Some, with limited contact with the new students, still believe that if students don't learn, it simply proves what the professor knew all along -- that they never should have been admitted to college. A dimishing number of other professors see no reason for change since they still teach in selective institutions where self-propelling students don't really need teachers.

For the nation as a whole, however, there is a moving bandwagon of change, clearly hitched to attempts to personalize and individualize instruction. The new emphases on the quality of students' learning appears to offer some potential solutions to two current problems. These are the twin concerns of quality and equality in education. Fifteen years ago, John Gardner (1961) asked the question, "Can we be equal and excellent too?" Higher education has not yet answered that question to anyone's satisfaction, but it now appears that if an affirmative answer is forthcoming, it requires thinking about education in new ways.

Traditional group-oriented education has emphasized equality in

the amount of time spent at the learning task and inequality in the amount learned. Thus, everyone spends three hours per week for a semester to accumulate three educational credits, but individual differences are recognized by permitting variation in the amount learned.

Some students receive A's and B's; some D's and F's. Individualized learning and especially mastery learning reverses the emphasis, stressing equality in the amount learned and inequality in the time spent. Thus everyone must learn the subject to the same high level of achievement but some will take longer than others. Although we have perhaps anticipatedthe concepts behind mastery learning by using the terms "fast" and "slow" learners as euphemisms for bright and dull, traditional education thinks of individual differences in terms of the capacity for learning rather than individual differences in the rate of learning.

If Benjamin Bloom, Jerome Bruner and other scholars are correct in their assertion that anyone can learn the basic educational curriculum if given enough time and appropriate help, then we have a breakthrough that permits us to conceptualize education in new ways. Such a reconceptualization would have profound implications for every aspect of education. And it would make the remaining years of the 20th century anything but boring. The task ahead does indeed call for new commitments as the nation moves beyond access for all toward learning for each.

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